

# SLAVERY

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## INTRODUCTION

This review<sup>1</sup> might have been called "The Problem of Slavery in Anthropological Thought," in modest tribute to Davis's masterly examination of how Western thought had, over the centuries, struggled with the notion of slavery (23, 24). Simply stated, the problem is this: why has modern anthropology, which claims that nothing human is alien to it, consistently ignored so widespread a phenomenon?

First, Table 1 shows some statistics, derived from Miller's bibliography of research on slavery (94-96):

Anthropologists have contributed some 6 percent of the total bibliographical entries. The rest comes overwhelmingly from history, with economic history a distant second. Overall, the anthropological contribution is narrowly focused on Africa and the Caribbean. It is also recent—for example, two African collections of papers of the mid-1970s (90, 92) account for fully a third of the some 75 anthropological entries on African slavery. Anthropology almost completely forgot slavery in the 1920 to 1960 period, when so much of its modern world view was being forged. The amnesia was, above all, theoretical. Slavery was noted in local contexts, in ethnographic monographs rather than in articles, which are the main vehicle for theory in American anthropology. But when it comes to general books, surveys, and symposia, the landscape is indeed bare. *Anthropology Today* (68), the 1953 "encyclopedic inventory," makes no mention of slavery at all. Most of the outstanding general books of the period have one or two ethnographic references. This is true of *General Anthropology*, by Boas and associates (9); of Chapple & Coon (13); of Linton's *Study of Man* (73),

<sup>1</sup>This review can be read more profitably in conjunction with Patterson's review (107) of studies of slavery in the 1977 *Annual Review of Sociology*. The most extensive bibliography on slavery is by Miller (94-96), of which an expanded version is forthcoming, and to which I am profoundly indebted.

Table 1 Distribution of bibliographical entries on slavery<sup>a</sup>

Topic or region	Total number of entries (%)	Number of anthropological entries (%)	Percentage of anthropological entries within each region/topic
General and comparative	326 (10.0)	35 (16.7)	10.7
North America (Afro-American)	851 (26.1)	12 (5.7)	1.4
Mainland Spanish American	207 (6.3)	11 (5.3)	5.3
Spanish Caribbean	58 (1.8)	6 (2.9)	10.3
Non-Spanish Caribbean	197 (6.0)	39 (18.7)	19.8
Portuguese America & Africa	278 (8.5)	5 (2.4)	1.8
Non-Islamic Africa	186 (5.7)	61 (29.2)	32.8
Muslim world	133 (4.1)	12 (5.7)	9.0
Slave trade	465 (14.3)	14 (6.7)	3.0
Miscellaneous (including Ancient, Asian, European, and American Indian)	558 (17.0)	14 (6.7)	2.5
	3259 (100)	209 (100)	6.4

<sup>a</sup>Source: Miller (94, 96), Miller & Borus (95).

but not of his ethnographic *Tree of Culture* (74); of Herskovits's *Man and His Works* (50), in spite of his research on Dahomean slavery (48) and his life-long concern with Afro-American cultural history (49, 51); of Kroeber's *Anthropology* (67), for all its panoramic survey of cultural developments and Kroeber's intimate acquaintance with Northwest Coast slavery; of Murdock's *Social Structure* (101), though slavery is listed among his universal ethnographic complexes (102). Lowie alone stands in rather splendid isolation, with a four-page section on slavery in his *Social Organization* (77). In the flood of general texts since the late 1950s, the picture is not greatly improved. Harris (43) mentions slavery only in connection with modern colonial history, but otherwise his materialist approach ignores this historic source of manpower. Others either ignore slavery or mention it very briefly. Only a few treat it as a major institution [e.g. Hoebel (54), Keesing (61), or Bohannan (10)]. Most of the discussions are atheoretical—understandably, given the paucity of theory to draw on.

Now, textbooks and general works represent the discipline's collective statement about what it considers important in the human condition, and, more subtly, what it wishes the outsider—the educated layman or the captive freshman—to see as important. In this perspective, the message has been that slavery is incomparably less important a phenomenon than *compadrazco* or the distinction between cross and parallel cousins. This was not always so in anthropology, however, as a look at its earlier days shows.

## SLAVERY AND THE PRECURSORS OF MODERN ANTHROPOLOGY

Almost universally among the classical social evolutionists, slavery was given serious theoretical consideration. Tylor (129, pp. 434 ff) saw its origin in the economic use of war captives, and Morgan (100, pp. 549 ff) in the rise of private property. Maine (84, pp. 156–61) gave it a legal exposition, some of which still remains to be absorbed by many modern analyses. Spencer (118), Westermarck (138), and Sumner & Keller (120) each devoted a chapter to slavery, while Landtman (69) exhaustively examined it in three chapters. And the turn of the century saw Nieboer's lengthy comparative ethnological treatise (103).

With the salient exception of Nieboer, these writers gave a prominent place to ancient, especially Graeco-Roman, slavery. And the Graeco-Roman model—with its variations and dynamics—provided them with a more accurate institutional view of slavery than the prevailing modern model, which tends to be based on a stereotypic image of New World Afro-American slavery. This early body of theory clustered around several issues:

1. All these writers were aware that slavery was an extremely widespread phenomenon, ethnographically and historically.

2. They saw slavery as a systemic attribute of certain early stages of social development. They had very little to say about New World slavery, treating it as an historical anomaly—a view that added scientific weight to the abolitionism of nineteenth century philosophical liberalism.

3. At the same time, with the contextual relativism typical of nineteenth century evolutionism, they also saw primitive and ancient slavery as a progressive development. The evolutionary function of slavery was expressed by Spencer thus: "undisciplined primitive man will not labour continuously, and it is only under a regime of compulsion that there is acquired the power of application which has made civilization possible" (118, p. 465). Sumner & Keller echoed this view 30 years later: slavery supersedes "the earlier law of massacre and cannibalism" and "it was in the school of oppression of which enslavement was a salient feature, that the human race learned steady industry" (120, pp. 231–32).

4. All these writers perceived a connection between slavery and levels of economy. Hunters did not enslave, as a rule, because for them control over a slave was neither easy nor profitable. Fishing tribes, however, could use captives and did (the Northwest Coast being the much discussed example). Slavery came into its own with agriculture. About pastoralists, there was disagreement, reflecting the common disagreement in the nineteenth century about their evolutionary status; some, notably Nieboer (103, pp. 286ff),

treated slavery among them as anomalous and arising from external circumstances, while others, such as Thurnwald (124, pp. 202–26), saw slavery as originating in the pastoral stage. These various empirical correlations were given statistical cross-cultural backing by Nieboer (103) and Hobhouse et al (53, pp. 233–37).

5. These writers (Nieboer excepted) recognized the significance of gradations and wide variations within slavery. Most found it necessary to talk of at least two types: an early domestic and a later chattel-like type. Other features seen as significant included the following: slaves varied in status, could occupy high positions, and were not universally unhappy with their lot; masters in most societies did not have unlimited rights over the slaves, Rome being exceptional; the slave usually had some rights over himself; slaves could own property and some slaves owned their own slaves; there could be slaves without masters; and there was sometimes intermarriage between slaves and the free (69, pp. 229, 250; 84, pp. 157, 160; 118, pp. 464–65, 474–75; 138, pp. 676ff.)

6. These writers saw labor as only one of the uses to which slaves were put, others being as varied as wives and concubines, artisans, warriors, clerks, professionals, bureaucrats, high officials, and so on.

7. Again with the exception of Nieboer, these writers' sensitivity to the empirical variations in the status of slaves prevented them from defining slaves as "property." Westermarck argued against Nieboer's definition of slave as one over whom the owner had unlimited rights by pointing out that "the notion of ownership does not involve that the owner of a thing is always entitled to do with it whatever he likes" (138, p. 670).

8. This is related to another point, namely, that being evolutionists, these writers viewed slavery as an historical process rather than as a "thing," and they did not search for logically exclusive definitions, such as would be necessary in a synchronic analysis. Where the modern concern in definitions is to establish boundaries, theirs was to establish origins, pathways, and transformations in the full development of the institution. Thus, Sumner & Keller (120, pp. 221 ff)—not unlike Marx (see below)—saw slavery as the appropriation of men, analogous to and following the appropriations of fire and animals; and as with these, the mature form took time to evolve.

9. In such a processual view, features that coexist at present are not of equal historical depth, reflecting a sequence rather than a functional complex. These early writers knew that slaves were furnished by wars, trade, kidnapping, debts, legal punishment, sale of relatives, and self-sale. Yet for all their awareness of these variations in the acquisition of slaves, when it came to origins, war and conquest was the preferred explanation (e.g. 69, pp. 232, 285–86; 118, pp. 465–67; 120, pp. 222, 231, 237; 138, pp. 672 ff). According to Tylor, "slavery appears as soon as the barbaric warrior spares

the life of his enemy when he has him down and brings him home to drudge for him and till the soil" (129, pp. 434–35). This insistence on warfare as cause probably derived from the Roman theory of slavery in which the master acquired total rights over the war captive by having chosen to spare his life.

This outline of the evolutionist paradigm also applies in very broad terms to Marx's view of slavery. Since Marxian analysis has figured prominently in some recent work on slavery, Marx may be appropriately considered here together with other nineteenth century evolutionists. An exact contemporary of Morgan's, Marx was older than most of the other figures mentioned, and his ethnographic knowledge of slavery was accordingly more restricted. But like many of them, he was very well versed in the classical scholarship of his time, which saw mature Graeco-Roman slavery as more extensive and more chattel-like than modern scholarship would grant. Marx saw the ancient slave not as labor (within the land-labor-capital triad) but as "an organic accessory of the land" and as a "further development of property" (87, pp. 89, 91). Like other evolutionists, Marx saw slavery processually and developmentally, though unlike them he did not see its roots to lie in violence and war: "the slavery which is latent in the family only develops gradually with the increase of population and of needs, and with the extension of external intercourse, either war or trade" (86, p. 126). One need hardly add that property, too, is seen by Marx processually and not by way of a single exclusive definition. Finally, Marx also saw slavery as an ancient institution whose existence in the capitalist world was an anomaly and in which it was transformed into an aberrant species of labor (85, p. 591). Where Marx differs from the evolutionists is in his treatment of slavery not as a universal stage in evolution but as being confined to the development of "ancient classical" society, whose primitive social structure differed from that of the "Germanic," "Slavonic," and "Asiatic" forms of society (87).

Another writer who departs in important respects from the evolutionist paradigm summarized above is Nieboer, whose *Slavery as an Industrial System* (103) stands apart in that it was a single volume entirely addressed to slavery, that it was overwhelmingly ethnological and ignored the classical world, and that its theory was phrased in synchronically functionalist terms. The configuration is a "modern" one, and this may well account for Nieboer's appeal to some modern writers.

Nieboer began with an essentialist definition of the slave "as a man who is the property of another, politically and socially at a lower level than the mass of the people, and performing compulsory labour" (103, p. 5). He added, however, that "the great function of slavery can be no other than *a division of labour*" (p. 7, Nieboer's emphasis), and this made him dismiss even chattel slavery as slavery unless slaves were present in large numbers

(p. 302). And finally, to confound it all further, he swept aside the problems posed by the wide variations in slavery by a simple procedure: "in inquiring whether in any country there are slaves, we need not ask whether there is labour imposed on subjected men . . . When we are told that in such a country some men are the property of others, we may be sure that they perform some kind of compulsory labour, and are justified in calling them slaves" (p. 9). Thus, Nieboer's conceptual inconsistencies were finally glossed over by a self-fulfilling operational definition.

Seeing slavery as a wholly economic institution, Nieboer provided a wholly economic theory for it in terms of the economic triad of "land," "labor," and "capital." His thesis may be stated as follows: when land is freely available and resources are open, and when subsistence is easy to procure because capital requirements are very low, people will work for themselves and not hire themselves out. If the possibility now arises of exploiting human labor, an entrepreneur can obtain such labor only by force—that is, by enslavement. On the other hand, when all the land has been appropriated, some of the independent labor cannot procure its subsistence and it becomes willing to hire itself out for wages. Since free labor can be used more flexibly and efficiently than slave labor, the entrepreneur prefers wage labor and slavery withers away. Interestingly—and unlike nineteenth century liberal economists and abolitionists—Nieboer does not treat free labor as inherently more efficient for the employer than slave labor. Efficiency, for him, is a matter of context. With open resources, free labor would be impossibly expensive for the entrepreneur, who, in order to keep it, would have to pay more than the laborer produces on his own. With the disappearance of open resources, however, it is the discipline of unemployment that makes wage labor willing and efficient. The unstated central variable in all this—as Engerman points out (28, pp. 56 ff)—is the potential surplus produced by the laborer and the question of who can appropriate it and how.

There are two levels to Nieboer's theory. At the abstract level, "slavery can only exist when subsistence is easy to procure without the aid of capital" (103, p. 302), that is, when there is no free labor waiting to be hired. But Nieboer treats this formula concretely by first casting it into the land-labor-capital form and then by giving almost naively literal meanings to these terms. Thus, the open resources become literally "free land," and inducted labor becomes "slave labor"; the appropriated surplus is agricultural, and entrepreneurship consists of the use of people in production, and agricultural production at that. Nieboer's overconcretization of his thesis makes him uneasy about slavery in pastoral societies, among whom "land" and "capital" in the economic sense of the terms tend to merge, and he dismisses the 45% incidence among pastoralists as nonsystemic and attributable

to exogenous influences of the slave trade and the nearness of “inferior races.” Yet the centerpiece of his theory—slavery among the agriculturalists—rests on but the slightly higher incidence of 56% (103, pp. 262ff., 294ff.)

Though Nieboer’s research was consistently referred to by contemporaries, there were disagreements with many aspects of his theory. Westermarck pointed to the absence of the supply-side factor—that potential demand for slavery does not automatically provide slaves (138, p. 672). Sumner & Keller stressed what many modern critics were later to stress (e.g. 25, 28)—that slavery requires the ability to control slaves and “thus comes to be an issue of the regulative or political organization quite as much as the economic” (120, p. 226). And a veritable drumfire of criticism, based on American Indian data, came from MacLeod in a flutter of somewhat repetitive articles (80–83).

It is clear from this survey that the nineteenth and early twentieth century did leave a considerable and rather sophisticated body of data and conceptual problems [e.g. Landtman’s (69) remains a most useful analytical ethnographic survey]. This foundation was more than sufficient for further work.

## SLAVERY AND MODERN ANTHROPOLOGY

To return to the puzzle with which this article began: why the avoidance of slavery as a theoretical issue by modern anthropology in its classic 1920 to 1960 period? The problem is one in the sociology of knowledge. A serious historical examination of anthropology from this perspective, however, has barely begun, and I can only attempt here to suggest some seemingly plausible explanations.

When anthropology made its great leap into that fount of first-hand data—“the field”—it transformed itself intellectually and sociologically. The anthropological sample of human variation became thereafter increasingly restricted to those societies that one could personally visit—in the twentieth century, this meant societies that had been subdued and forbidden such practices as cannibalism, or warfare, or slavery. The historical vision of anthropology thus narrowed as its functional outlook grew—this precisely when it became clear that contemporary “primitives” are contemporary and no substitute for societies of the past. Yet attacks on “conjectural history” in Britain and an even earlier increasing nervousness about it in America—including Boas’s 1920 rejection of it (8)—resulted in an indifference to history even when that history was recoverable. And a certain arrogance about the superiority of the anthropological perception also made it easy to dismiss the reports of early travelers, administrators, and missionaries as biased and naive.

There was, moreover, the educational function of anthropology as perceived by anthropologists increasingly moving out of museums into the classroom. For all the recent modishness of dwelling on the connection between colonialism and anthropology, the fact remains that the anthropologists of the middle decades of this century overwhelmingly saw themselves as the extirpators of the ethnocentric, racist, and generally uncomplimentary view of “their” societies by the common man in the West. The dominant generalized functionalism of the period served these purposes well: everything in a society, once understood, made positive sense (if it did not, it was not understood), and to understand was not simply to forgive but to approve. This was certainly the message (as it largely still is) of the textbooks and general works, in which the only society not enjoying an automatic dispensation from error is the anthropologist’s own.

Anthropology thus took upon itself a public relations task for societies that had been much maligned, much misunderstood, and much maltreated. And as good advocates, anthropologists preferred not to dwell on what was repugnant to the jury of Western public opinion—be it cannibalism or slavery. (This was particularly true of American Africanists, dealing as they were with societies that had indigenous slavery and that had also furnished the ancestors of a mistreated minority at home.) The squeamishness and liberal overcompensation on these issues were not confined to Anglo-American anthropology. As Meillassoux, the French Marxist anthropologist, puts it: “Slavery, human sacrifices, ritual cannibalism, abandonment of the old etc. remain, in Western thought and feeling, expressions of primitivism par excellence, and ethnologists, still strongly dominated by the notion of ‘good savages,’ often hesitate to burden with a value judgment peoples who have won their sympathy and who are today victims of exploitation” (90, p. 14, author’s translation). And Meillassoux adds, correctly, that our African colleagues are more realistic on these issues.

Other factors came in. With the decline of classical education, the implicit model of slavery most accessible to modern scholars became the stereotype of the New World plantation, haphazardly absorbed from novels, textbooks, and films, and largely rooted in the Victorian abolitionist literature. In this stereotype, slavery is singularly monolithic, invariant, servile, chattel-like, focused on compulsory labor, maintained by violence, and suffused with brute sexuality. (It is no accident that our modern metaphorical use of slavery is confined to forced labor, compulsory prostitution, and theatrical sex-play.) Against this model, the slave systems discovered during fieldwork were usually found to be so benign as scarcely to merit the name of slavery [see, for example, the romanticized view of all African slavery, typical of the 1960s, by Davidson (22)]. This benign image was, of course, comfortably reinforced by the then dominant view of “anthropological” societies as harmonious and conflict-free structures of reciprocities.



Fieldwork often reinforced this picture. Slavery had, for the most part, become a matter of memory, and informants' accounts of it were given in a new social and political setting. Some informants softened the picture to cater to known Western sensibilities. But a more important reason was usually internal: former slaves had become voluntary retainers and quasi relatives as a matter of public myth that benefited all concerned (cf 78, p. 188) and no informant was going to rock that boat. Also, slaves were often addressed by kinship terms (such as "child" or "nephew"). To modern Westerners, the kinship metaphor suggests nurture and closeness; in Africa, and elsewhere, it conveys authority and subordination (66, pp. 24–26).

Since most of the data on slavery are historical, it is in history and economic history that the serious thinking about slavery has been taking place, bringing with it a host of sophisticated methodological and conceptual issues. There is nothing within anthropology that approaches, in sheer intellectual intensity and scholarly vigor, the debates that are exemplified in works such as those of Tannenbaum (122), Elkins (27), Lane (70), Stamp (119), Genovese (33–36), Fogel & Engerman (31), David et al (21), Gutman (41), Jordan (60), or Knight (64).

## REEMERGENCE OF THE ANTHROPOLOGICAL STUDY OF SLAVERY

The recent spurt in the anthropological study of slavery is skewed in its focus, as is the historians' work in its own way. As Table 1, summarizing Miller's bibliography (94–96) shows, most of the data and thinking on slavery—over 60% of the entries—are concentrated on Afro-America (especially the southern United States) and the Atlantic slave trade. By contrast, the modest anthropological share is focused on Africa and the non-Spanish Caribbean. Yet these contrasting emphases are not unconnected historically.

The civil rights movement of the 1960s gave a visible impetus to studies of American slavery and of the African background of Afro-Americans, the latter being, until then, a tabooed subject in most American liberal and Afro-American circles [on the sociology of knowledge of this interesting episode, see Szwed (121)]. The reinvigoration of Afro-American studies spilled over into the well-established study of Caribbean history and anthropology. Here, slavery was a constant presence in history and historical sociology (see 105) and a backdrop to anthropology (see 49, 51, 99). There was also the revived interest in the Atlantic slave trade, a signpost being Curtin's historical-statistical synthesis (18). The independently burgeoning African studies of the time could provide a view of the supply side of the Atlantic trade; initially the concentration was on the coastal areas, to be

followed soon by new research on the inland organization of the trade and, finally, on indigenous African slavery itself.

This picture, sketchy and oversimplified, is primarily American. European scholarship, however, did move in tandem with these trends, mostly for its own reasons, though diffusion, too, has played its part. Traditionally, history was where the documents were, and for Africa, it was first in colonial policy and administration and mission history and then trade. With the rise of the "New African history" in the later 1950s, seeking an Afrocentric perspective on events, historians began to look into the documents in order to deal with topics and areas where before only anthropologists used to tread. Some of the documentation dealt, of course, with the slave trade and with indigenous slavery. Compendia on African economic history, such as those edited by Gray & Birmingham in 1970 (40) and Meillassoux in 1971 (89), began to be peppered with references to slavery, where less than a decade before the most authoritative review of historical research in Africa, edited by Vansina et al (131), contained only one incidental and minor reference to it. By the 1970s an additional push came from the rise within French Africanist scholarship of varieties of new Marxisms, interested in the historical dynamics of socioeconomic formations and taking for granted the human proclivity to exploit. With historical research in full swing, the anthropological picture of the African past began increasingly to look like what it has in fact been all along—a twentieth century construction of an "ethographic present" from which large chunks of the past were missing.

Within Western anthropology in general, the new interest in slavery had at least one precedent. In the mid-1940s, Siegel published a monograph on Mesopotamian slavery (115) and a comparative theoretical article on slavery in general (114), which included a critique of Nieboer's thesis and examined the different political configurations that supported or discouraged the development of different types of slavery. But this single-handed revival of slavery as a theoretical issue worthy of anthropological attention found no response in the discipline. Also, in 1966, an English translation was published of a 1941 Russian work on North American Indian slavery (2). It is, however, within Africanist anthropology that the present attention to slavery began.

In 1967, Cohen edited a special supplement on slavery in Africa, published in the sociological journal *Trans-Action* (15), consisting of a brief analytical introduction and five case studies; 4 years later he followed this up with a general examination of "servility" (16). Though both pieces bear some marks of the civil rights climate of the 1960s, they address themselves primarily to establishing an empirical and analytical framework, raising such issues as variation in the status of slaves, differences between small and

complex societies, the links with kinship systems, the fact that slavery usually cross-cuts social strata. In 1970, Tuden & Plotnicov edited a book on African social stratification (127), with an "Introduction" treating slavery as a principle of social stratification. A lengthy and sophisticated theoretical discussion of African slavery appeared in 1971, by Meillassoux, in his introduction to a volume on trade and markets in West Africa (88); the collection, however, is primarily economic and historical and the majority of contributors are historians. From the mid-1970s to the present, four significant volumes have appeared, devoted entirely to African slavery. The first, *L'esclavage en Afrique pré-coloniale*, in 1975, was edited by Meillassoux, with anthropologists as contributors (91). The second, in 1977, *Slavery in Africa*, edited by Miers & Kopytoff (93), was a joint effort by anthropologists (in a minority) and historians. In 1979, Gemery & Hogenborn edited *The Uncommon Market* (32), by historians and economists, dealing with the slave trade from an Afrocentric perspective. And in 1981 *The Ideology of Slavery in Africa*, edited by Lovejoy, appeared, with ten historians and one anthropologist as contributors (76). To emphasize the recency of much of the anthropological contribution, one may note again that the 25 articles by anthropologists in the first two volumes represent a third of the total entries on African slavery in Miller's bibliography and 12% of all the anthropological entries in it for the entire world (see Table 1).

The anthropological interest in slavery has also begun to spread out from Africa to other continents—or it is at least creeping eastward. The 1980 collection, edited by Watson, deals overwhelmingly with the Indian Ocean basin and southern and southeastern Asia (136). On the comparative front, however, anthropology continues to lag. A 1972 collection of reprints, edited by Winks and dealing with different periods and continents, included only two anthropological articles out of 20 (139). Less than a decade later, in two multidisciplinary symposia on slavery, edited respectively by Craton (17) and by Rubin & Tuden (113), there were some 10 anthropologists out of 90 contributors.

## CONTEMPORARY ANTHROPOLOGICAL ANALYSIS OF SLAVERY

Whatever the reason, the ghost of Nieboer rather than of any other anthropological forefather rises up whenever a search for theories of slavery begins. The status of Nieboer's theory was considerably enhanced when Domar (25), an economic historian, brought it up in 1970 in connection with his reexamination of a thesis on the rise of Russian serfdom by Kliuchevsky, the eminent turn-of-the-century Russian historian. Following Kli-

uchevsky, Domar stressed the crucial role of the political factor in solving the problem that was also stated by Nieboer: how is the entrepreneur—economic or, in Russia's case, political—to attach people to his estate when open resources and free land beckon?

The revival of Nieboer's thesis leads to critiques, but above all it stimulates a number of interesting suggestions. Nieboer's cross-cultural statistics are shown to be incorrect, or at best inconclusive, by new studies (3a, 38, 106). The critics point to the importance, indeed the primacy, of the political variables, and to the fact that free land is neither a necessary nor a sufficient condition of slavery. Goody (38) raises the issue of the usually ignored supply side in the development of slavery. Engerman (28) points out that free land under some political conditions—e.g. the American frontier—has acted to enhance individual autonomy and that, in general, factors leading to the rise of slavery may be quite different from those that maintain it, so that the disappearance of the initial causal factors does not necessarily lead to the demise of slavery. Patterson (106) refines the classification of compulsory labor by pointing to the different strategies pursued by the masters and entrepreneurs in three different economies: (a) one in which the master consumes the product of servile labor; (b) one in which he sells it in a stable insular market; and (c) one in which he trades it in an international market with fluctuating prices. This refinement makes it possible to deal within a single analytical framework with "primitive" slavery, serfdom, and commercial plantation slavery. Kopytoff & Miers (66) emphasize that slaves are not only units of productive labor on land but also—and sometimes exclusively—social and political capital, and that the "markets" involved and the calculus of slave use differ in these different cases; wage labor, for example, is not really competitive with retainers and quasi relatives, when the latter are what one wants, and competition for the latter is governed not by simple calculation of economic return but by the numbers of retainers controlled by rivals. Such considerations lead Pryor (111) to make a clear-cut distinction, in his statistically based analysis, between slaves as "economic capital" and slaves as "social capital." Pryor also points out that Nieboer's theory is more successful in explaining the absence of slavery than its presence, the latter being clearly dependent on a host of factors (111, p. 31-32). This crucial reversal in stating the problem of origins suggests a formal approach to what has only been incidentally broached in the literature—that "slavery is the rule and freedom the exception" (118, p. 464); "to the economist, the question probably should be why slavery doesn't exist rather than why it does" (28, p. 27); and "given the ubiquity of these institutions, what requires special explanation is not the presence of slavery but the historical instances of its absence" (65, pp. 71-72).

A particularly interesting, though inadvertent, critique of Nieboer's argument comes from the implications of Watson's analysis (135). Contrasting

Asian material with Kopytoff & Miers's African generalizations (66), Watson posits an "open" and a "closed" "mode of slavery." African slavery was predominantly "open" in that African kin groups were structurally open to absorbing strangers as quasi kinsmen, because, given the availability of land, the kin group's wealth resided in people. In most of Asia, by contrast, land was scarce and valued, and kin groups tended to be exclusive, did not incorporate slaves, and treated them more as chattel. Watson's theory, like Nieboer's, is rather too agricultural, but it stands Nieboer on his head. Where Nieboer sees land shortage as leading to the demise of chattel slavery, Watson sees it as accounting for chattel slavery.

In the recent literature on slavery outside of the New World, arguments have tended to cluster around certain issues. I shall weave the rest of this article around these issues. I shall focus on the anthropological contributions while referring to those outside of anthropology when they are an intrinsic part of the debate.

## PROBLEMS OF DEFINITION

The definition of slavery as a form of property and compulsory labor continues to appeal. Yet the definition runs against a long-established approach in anthropology to the concept of property (e.g. 77, pp. 129ff.) As Bunzel put it, the concept by itself is a "meaningless abstraction," leaving us, ethnographically speaking, with "a miscellaneous collection of equities, rights, interests, claims, privileges, and preferences" (11, p. 240). "Property" is merely a shorthand term for a bundle of legal rights, be it in people or in objects (cf 130)—rights that remain to be specified in any particular instance and that vary from object to object, from society to society, and from period to period. This is something, of course, that legal theorists take for granted (e.g. 55). To say, then, that a slave is the "property" of the master is to say: "the master exercises some unspecified rights over the slave"—hardly an informative statement. Moreover, when such rights are specified ("the master may sell or kill the slave," or "the slave's belongings are not his but his master's"), we still need to know what rights govern other, nonslave relationships (thus, the kin group may also have the right to sell or kill its "free" members, and any member's belongings may turn out to be corporately controlled). This conundrum is particularly evident in African slavery (see 66, pp. 11ff.), where the rights we most closely associate with "property" (such as saleability, right of free disposal or destruction, rights to income) are often held by a corporate lineage equally in its "slaves" and its full-fledged members.

The nature of property is thus not invariant but changes precisely with different cultural and socioeconomic contexts. Historically, the reduction of the American and British Caribbean slave into a piece of "property" corre-

sponds to the rising notion of nascent capitalism that a free Englishman should not have his property infringed upon by the state (see 39). It is for such reasons that Meillassoux, too, objects to defining slaves as property when the slave system “grew within a patrimonial and not a property system” (92, p. 321).

Since the property definition “dehumanizes” slaves, it is not surprising that scholars should then discover a “contradiction” of their own making between the notions of people-as-things and of people-as-people. Thus, Tuden & Plotnicov, in exploring this contradiction, even suggest that it may make slavery an “ultimately” untenable social arrangement (126, p. 12). The idea of this contradiction has long haunted Western intellectual thought about slavery (see 24, pp. 39ff.) The roots of it perhaps lie in the Roman legal definition of a slave as being, in Finley’s words (30, p. 307) “subject to the *dominium* of another, contrary to nature” and in the interpretation of “against nature” in Enlightenment humanist terms. Hegel transforms the contradiction into a complex dialectic in which the respective identities of master and slave become mutually dependent (46, pp. 173ff.), and one finds an echo of this view in Genovese’s nuanced analysis of the interdependent master-slave relationship in *Roll, Jordan, Roll* (36). But alas, in straight ethnographic terms, the contradiction is not always easy to find. As Patterson pithily puts it, there is no evidence that a Jamaican planter felt the contradiction between “his slaves as things in the fields and as persons in bed” (107, p. 432). And in the innumerable societies where slaves were acquired as social entities—as wives or retainers—the contradiction need not be greater than in any relationship of subordination. As Hindess & Hirt put it, the notion rests on the liberal ethnocentric assumption that slavery is an unnatural monstrosity and consequently not viable in some fundamental sense (52, pp. 114ff.)

Related to the property definition is that of slavery as compulsory labor—both fitting comfortably with the stereotype of New World slavery. But “labor” is by no means a clear-cut concept: does one mean by it physical labor, or the “productive” labor and services of the economist’s language, or sexual and reproductive services, or the amorphous services of household retainers, or the specialized services of high officials? All too often the proponents of the labor definition think of its cruder forms and only grant the others when reminded of them. As to the criterion of compulsion or coercion, there are problems there too, especially when coercion is defined so subtly (e.g. 135, pp. 7-8) as to make it indistinguishable from run-of-the-mill cultural conformity.

Definitions in terms of property and compulsory labor commonly oppose slavery to “freedom.” But freedom is a notoriously ethnocentric concept, and to say that it is “relative” (75, p. 12) is like saying that property is

"relative." Ethnographically, the opposite of slavery in most societies (and with the striking exception of the modern West) is some notion not of autonomy but of citizenship, of civic belongingness, of attachment to structure rather than detachment from it (so the "freeman" of colonial New England was the locally anchored property holder—the very opposite of the autonomous wanderer). Simmel has pointed out that for the ancient Greek citizen (as for most of premodern mankind) "freedom" was coextensive with the protection of citizenship (116, p. 274). While lack of freedom is seldom proposed as a formal criterion of slavery, the term "free" is very widely used descriptively as the opposite of slave.

All these problems of substantive definition raise a more general problem—that of the "essentialist" or idealist approach to definition, in which "slavery" becomes a single Platonic essence with various concrete but imperfect manifestations of it on the ground. This is in contrast to a nominalist approach, in which certain institutions are, for some identifiable reasons, classified by us under the English word "slavery." "Slavery" may then be used not as an *analytical* concept but as an *evocative* one—much as we use "economics" and "politics," for all the endless debates about their true definition. "Slavery" evokes certain kinds of relationships and draws attention to them, but it is not a useful analytical component of general theoretical models intended for cross-cultural use. It is in this evocative sense that the term is used in this review.

## PROCESSUAL APPROACH TO SLAVERY

Like any social relationship, slavery involves some system of rights between master and slave. This relationship is brought about in a certain way—usually by capture or purchase. But the method of acquisition does not by itself determine the uses to which the acquired person is put. In many societies, children are adopted by way of purchase. The act of acquisition creates a set of rights which are defined, allocated, and subsequently maintained, or transformed, or abolished, or transferred. Certain trajectories in this process evoke the term "slavery" in our minds; other trajectories, as in adoption, do not; and many remain eternally ambiguous. Thus, slavery is a matter of becoming rather than being. Both recent examinations of African slavery (66, 90) approach slavery in this processual way. In this view, slavery is not to be defined as a status but rather as a process of status transformation which may last over a lifetime and spill over into the following generations. The slave begins as a social outsider and undergoes a process of becoming some kind of insider. A person, stripped of his previous social identity, is put at the margins of a new social group and is given a new social identity in it.

The view of the slave as an outsider, a stranger, and a foreigner, has been proposed by Lévy-Bruhl as the jural key to Roman slavery (72), and the theme has been elaborated, primarily in the perspective of antiquity, by Finley (30). But though slaves have often been ethnic, cultural, or "racial" outsiders, they were not always that; debt-slaves or wergild-slaves are usually insiders, sometimes neighbors, sometime even relatives. The outsiderness, then, is sociological, not ethnic. Unlike Simmel's "stranger" (116, p. 402ff.), the slave (even when a neighbor) is *made* into an outsider by being made into a nonperson, deprived of his or her former roles and statuses. This is the moment when the slave is indeed an object, a chattel, with neither an old nor a new social identity. Symbolically, his position is analogous to the nonperson at the midpoint of a *rite de passage*. But unless the slave is to be quickly resold or sacrificed, he must be somehow inserted into the new society, resocialized, given a new identity (no matter how marginal), under the social sponsorship of the acquirers. Indeed, this insertion often takes the ritual form of the second half of a *rite de passage* [for fine-grained analyses based on this model, see particularly Bazin (4), Izard (59), Perrot (109), Piault (110), and Terray (123); also Patterson (108) for an analysis of slavery as "social death"].

The sociological issue in slavery is thus not the dehumanization of the person but rather his or her rehumanization in a new setting and the problems that this poses for the acquirers. In extreme chattel systems, the integration into the new society is minimal, and the process is quickly stopped short. In most societies, the process is taken further. The task for analytical ethnography and comparative analysis is to relate the nature of the society to this process. For example, in relatively complex societies, with their many social niches, the variety of "paths" that the slave may take may be large (see 104), and in very complex societies, the variety may be bewildering; the slave may end up as a chained galley-oarsman or a Grand Vizier, a household eunuch or a king-making palace guard, a kitchen drudge or the next Sultan's mother. In simple and undifferentiated societies, the paths are few and the niches often indistinguishable from the masters' (see 58).

A significant aspect of this process is the structural direction of the incorporation and where it is permitted to end. Thus, in many African societies, the direction was toward membership in the acquirers' kin group, resulting in a "slavery-to-kinship" continuum, though full membership was seldom actually achieved. In what Watson calls the "closed mode of slavery" (135), the path toward kin group incorporation is closed much earlier. The ideal trajectory in the West Indies was in the opposite direction—toward "freedom," that is, detachment from the master and embarkation as "free Blacks" on a new path toward incorporation into the society at large as citizens—which was itself stopped short midway by racism and



racial legislation, resulting in what Handler has called “unnappropriated people” (42; see also 14). The process rarely leads to complete incorporation; the slave remains in various degrees marginal and slavery as a process is, in Vaughan’s term, “the institutionalization of marginality” (132; see also 66, p. 16). Thus, even when slaves are incorporated in kin group-based societies, the slaves are kinsmen in some contexts but are not in others. Watson finds this situation analytically contradictory (135, p. 6), but the contradiction is existential and lies at the core of slavery in such societies [for an example of the resulting politics of kinship and slavery, see MacGaffey (79)].

The fact that the acquisition of a stranger by purchase is an “economic” act need not mean that the subsequent use must be economic—no more in this case than in any other case of purchase. The use is, however, undoubtedly related to some broad “economizing” calculus. Thus, in much of the medieval Middle East, as also in Renaissance and early modern Europe, slaves were a luxury item whose nonproductive use by the rich was financed by a successful exploitation of the free economy by way of free labor. Watson makes the same case for slavery in south China (137).

The view of the slave as a nonperson in the process of some kind of incorporation applies, of course, only to the first-generation slave. The born-slave, by contrast, is the result of the social placement of a child as determined by the various rights in the fertility of the child’s parents—hence, the rights in the born-slave may not be concentrated in a single “master” (who, in any case, may be a corporate group). Chattel parents need not always produce chattel offspring, and the differences of status between the first and the succeeding generations may vary from none to enormous, depending on the different systems of rights surrounding mating and marriage—as for example in patrilineal as opposed to matrilineal systems (66, pp. 32–39). This has a bearing on the problem of whether the slave population of a society can reproduce itself sociologically. In some cases (26), the descendants of slaves may continuously dissolve into the population, raising the need for a constant resupply and predation upon neighboring populations. On the other hand, in some African societies in which corporate lineages tend both to sell and purchase members under different circumstances, it has been calculated that 25% to 40% of the population may become slave within five generations by way of such purely internal mechanisms and without any resort to outside sources (65, p. 68).

That slaves can be placed in various social niches within a society means that the slave population as a whole seldom represents a single social stratum; indeed, in complex stratified societies (New World excepted), slaves are apt to be vertically dispersed through the social structure and to share no common interests. Hence the relative rarity of slave revolts in such

societies, even when they contain an enormous proportion of slaves, such as the rather common 30% to 50% figure in western Africa. Moreover, as Caplan shows for South Asian slavery (12), power and status hierarchies may in any case be quite "insulated" from one another. In brief, slavery need not function as part of a society's overall stratification system. Nieboer's placement of a slave as "politically and socially at a lower level than the mass of the people" (103, p.5) would have surprised many a Grand Vizier or Janissary.

## PROBLEM OF ORIGINS

The problem of origins—generally shunned by modern anthropology—does occasionally arise among historians, who often look for the specific historical genesis of slavery in a local setting [e.g. the argument over the "origins" of African slavery between Rodney (112) and Fage (29)]. Economic historians are also apt to search for functionalist economic explanations of origins in terms of local conditions [e. g. Hopkins (57, pp. 21–27) sees African slavery arising from the need to do specialized but unpleasant tasks, such as mining, that appeared with early—i.e. proto-historic—economic development and links to large markets]. Anthropologists nowadays postulate only functional origins. Thus, Meillassoux—in a theory reminiscent more of Tylor than of Marx—considers a slave to be "necessarily the product of an act of violent capture," so that "warriors or bandits are of necessity found at the origin of his economic and social existence" (88, p. 23). Other approaches to the functional "origins" of slavery are less dramatic. Kopytoff & Miers see various African systems of slavery as particular kinds of systemic and repetitive crystallizations of African systems of rights-in-persons to which African kinship systems are also intimately tied (66, pp. 66–69). It may well be, of course, that no general theory of slavery is possible given that the core of the phenomena to which we attach the term—the transfer of full rights in a person—is so simple that the idea can arise again and again in quite disparate cultural and structural contexts.

## CONCLUSION

The decline of the historical-ethnological perspective and the rise of the analytical-functionalist outlook in modern anthropology resulted in depriving slavery of theoretical interest. Recently, slavery has once again been forced upon our attention, primarily by the burgeoning of historical work in areas previously monopolized by anthropology and partly also by the growth of ethnohistory and historical anthropology, both Marxist and non-

Marxist. Paradoxically, just as this interest in slavery is rising, first-hand field data on traditional institutions of servitude will continue to decline dramatically. The crucial data, then, are to be found in history—in the primary archival sources, in reconstruction through such methods as historical linguistics and archeology, in ever-shrinking oral traditions, and in the work of historians. The turning to the latter calls for a welcome and a caution.

The issues raised by historians of slavery in their debates will sooner or later enrich the anthropological work on slavery. On the other hand, the principal historical effort has been concentrated out of all reasonable proportion on Afro-American slavery and the Atlantic slave trade, and this poses some analytical problems. New World slavery, and especially its Southern American variety, is a peculiar form and not only in the sense that Marxists often see it—an anomalous ancient institution in the midst of capitalism. There are structural and cultural peculiarities too, and these have already shaped all too greatly our folk ideas and, by osmosis, our scholarly ideas about slavery. New World slavery presents an unusual combination of several features. The use of slaves was almost exclusively as productive labor. The slave economies were not parochial but linked into the international market, as the masters' societies were also linked into intercontinental cultural communities. The masters were monogamous; marriage being thus a scarce social resource, it was not feasible to establish that otherwise common connection between slavery and kinship. Masters and slaves also came from different gene pools, and slavery and racism could (and mostly did) become interwoven. This, in turn, inhibited what is a marked tendency in most complex societies to use slaves in a wide variety of social and political niches. This unusual combination of features makes New World slavery a somewhat confusing case for theoretical analysis. Too many factors confound one another. Yet what comparative work we have on slavery comes largely from the New World. The intercontinental anthropological comparison by Smith of Jamaican and Hausa slavery (117) remains both pioneering and exceptional.

Lately the historians have been widening the comparative perspective. The results suggest how widespread slavery has been, how far-flung its trade routes, how few the areas that had not been suppliers or consumers or both. The neat old picture of the slavery of antiquity being simply displaced by the serfdom of the Middle Ages holds no more; some areas of medieval Europe, such as England, show slave populations to have been as high at times as 20% (cf 5, 133, 134), figures that approach Africa's, as does the extent of the continental trade routes. Other areas, long ignored and coming to Western scholarly attention, include Southeast Asia (71), Korea (45), and Muscovite Russia (47). Some of this work revives old anthropological

questions about institutional diffusion, as in Verlinden's claim (134) about the direct transfer of organizational expertise from the slave plantations of the Mediterranean to the New World [for a historical overview of such trans-Atlantic transfers, see Curtin (19, 20)]. The most recent comparative examination of slavery, ranging widely through the historical and anthropological sources, is by Patterson (108), a sociologist (at the time of writing of this review, the work was in press).

The recent increased attention to Marx's thought has posed a salutary intellectual challenge to established modes of analysis (cf 6). There are, to be sure, many varieties of Marxisms contending, often fiercely, with one another [e.g. Meillassoux (92, pp. 329–30) on Hindess & Hirt (52)]. One is also sometimes hard put to distinguish, except for the terminology, where Marxism ends and a variety of historically aware functionalism begins [e.g. Bloch (7), Godelier (37)]. But these are quibbles. There is no doubt that the rise of modern Marxist analyses, with their strong sense of dialectics and their disdain for the crude materialism of past orthodoxy, has resulted in sensitizing non-Marxist anthropology to long-term historical-sociological processes—something anthropology had abandoned with evolutionism. Where the focus on the concept of culture has, in the past, tended to lead us more and more “inward”—toward psychology, “cognition,” and even biology—the more recent trends have been taking us “outward,” toward history and the wider society, from microsystem to macrodynamics.

These trends have notably led to a refinement in the analysis of ideology. In the past several decades, anthropologists have used ideology as a theoretically redundant term for the salient features of culture *qua* system of meanings—a kind of crystallization of cultural consciousness. And behavior was treated as a direct product of ideology. The influence of the more interesting Marxian concept of ideology as “false consciousness” promises to yield a more subtle analysis of the interrelationships over time among culture, ideas, behavior, and social system [see, for example, essays mainly by historians in (76)]. The rewards of this approach may be seen, within anthropology, in Bloch's comparison of two modes of production and slavery in Madagascar (7) or in Turton's examination of the role of slaves in Thailand (128). While historians have always been better than anthropologists at seeing the interplay of relationships over the long historical haul (see 1, 3, 44, 63), the line between historians and anthropologists sometimes blurs—compare, for example, historians Miller (97, 98) and Tlou (125) with anthropologists Klein (62) or Holsoe (56).

How easily can the anthropology of slavery turn ethnohistorical? In the case of some of the most interesting varieties of slavery, this means the kind of investment into scholarly training that anthropologists are not, as a rule, used to making—such as control of medieval Latin or Arabic, of philology,

calligraphy, and so on. The alternative is reliance on secondary sources—the historical monograph that has already processed the data in a way that the anthropologist might not have. But whatever the anthropologist chooses to do, the distinct anthropological contribution will continue to spring from our assumption that our concepts are always to some extent folk concepts, embedded in our Western experience, and that they can never be assumed to represent norms around which the institutions of other societies will necessarily cluster. As with so many other concepts in the past—religion, family, marriage, and so on—so also with “slavery” our understanding will probably grow in the very process of our dismantling the concept.

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